

INTERVIEW WITH DESIREE LEWIS

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Professor Desiree Lewis, from the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape, visited Unisa in February 2016 as a guest of the College of Human Sciences and was the distinguished speaker for the "Africa Speaks" series of talks by African scholars. She also delivered a talk in the Institute for Gender Studies on "Feminism and LGBTI studies and activism in South Africa". Here she is interviewed by Deirdre Byrne for *Gender Questions*.

DEIRDRE BYRNE FOR *GENDER QUESTIONS*: I want to start off with a question about your personal academic journey, largely because it parallels mine very closely. You started off with a PhD in literary studies and your doctorate was on Bessie Head. How did you move from there into women's and gender studies?

DESIREE LEWIS: It wasn't an abrupt move; it wasn't a sudden shift. For a long time I had been thinking critically about gender. Certainly, working on Bessie Head forced me to pay a lot of attention to gender, feminist literary theories as well as the critiques of mainstream feminism by postcolonial thinkers. But even before I did my PhD, I'd done a lot of work on women's writing which led me to explore feminist criticism. By the time I completed my PhD, I realised that working in gender studies would allow me a lot more freedom to work in interdisciplinary ways, and this was also a time when dedicated teaching and research sites on women's and gender studies were flourishing. I realised I wouldn't be bound to literary texts, and would be able to straddle disciplines and fields in ways I've always found refreshing and intellectually challenging. Interestingly, I think being trained as a literary theorist does allow one to straddle disciplines quite easily. And then, when I worked at the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, I had to work in a much more interdisciplinary way and focus squarely on gender. I also began to do more social science work and explore the distinct preoccupation with "methodologies", something which literary theorists rarely mention. So it was an important progression, and also a very organic one, which had to

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do with my own politics, my personal journey, my sense of producing knowledge and teaching in ways that were more overtly politicised, and my general making sense of the world around me.

DB: That sounds very similar to what happened to me. So I presume you've been very happy with the move from literary studies to women's and gender studies?

DL: I still am. There are times when I miss students who don't pay careful attention to texts – whatever form they take – who aren't trained to think about visual, media or cultural texts as representations. It's also often demoralising to find that many social science students (since the majority of gender studies students are social science ones) are sometimes very impatient with, for example, reading a short story or engaging with fiction, as though the world of fiction couldn't possibly be relevant to their preoccupations with the social and political. I assume that students should be able and willing to enjoy fiction and take it seriously on an epistemological level. Many of the students who opt for gender studies in South Africa tend to assume that the data we're working on is "out there", and miss the need to think about how data is discursively shaped. So I do miss many students' response to that, and sometimes I miss having long discussions about a novel or about form! But I think that is more than made up for by the sense of freedom I have in devising interdisciplinary courses, or writing in ways that disciplinary boundaries often dictate. Also, I've had some excellent MA and PhD students working on media and literary texts.

DB: Moving from there into your professional history, you mentioned that you started work at the African Gender Institute at UCT. Did you then move from there to the University of the Western Cape?

DL: Yes. Yes. Although UWC (the University of the Western Cape) was the university where I had my first formal post – in the English Department in the mid-1990s, after I came back from the United Kingdom, where I had done my MA after my studies at Wits University. Then I went to UCT and had a temporary post in the English Department. This was just before my appointment to UWC's English Department in the mid-1990s. I worked in the English Department at UKZN (the University of KwaZulu-Natal) for a year, and the AGI work (mainly involving research and editing the journal *Feminist Africa*, lasted for about three years. I returned to UWC after this – but to the Women's and Gender Studies Department.

DB: So were you in on the foundation of the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at UWC?

DL: Yes, I was. It was established in the mid-1990s under Rhoda Kadalie. Rhoda headed the Gender Equity Unit at UWC, which was responsible for driving the university's engagement with the gender transformation process that was happening in the country

at the time. So, for example, the Unit worked to ensure that women staff would have proper maternity benefits, pushed for the promotion of women academics, and also worked with students who were engaging with issues around gender and sexual justice. But not only that: Rhoda was also very keen to establish an academic tradition of feminism at UWC. She herself had studied gender studies at Utrecht University. So she started a winter school on women's and gender studies, which I was involved in along with other colleagues, such as Miki Flockemann, who were drawing on feminism in their home disciplines. Gradually an Honours programme and a Masters programme were built up, always with very small groups of students. We had to work hard, because our additional teaching in women's and gender studies wasn't acknowledged in our home departments: it was simply viewed as something that one chose to do.

DB: Isn't that the traditional international model of women's and gender studies, where women's and gender studies is viewed as something extra?

DL: Absolutely.

DB: So how was the department of Women's and Gender Studies established and how did it begin to teach?

DL: I think when I left, the Gender Equity Unit was only offering postgraduate teaching. It was not yet a department. It offered a Masters and an Honours programme, but had no PhDs or undergraduates. After I left, there was a strong push from certain staff to separate the academic from the practical programme. Many staff opposed this and felt that it would reinforce an artificial divide between activism and intellectual work. But some felt that it was a good way to ensure the academic clout of gender studies at UWC. So there was a separation between the activist component, which remained the GEU, and the academic project, which became known as the Women's and Gender Studies Programme.

DB: Was that 20 years ago?

DL: Yes. The Women's and Gender Studies Programme was operating as a *de facto* department for twenty years, but was only recently redesignated as a Department.

DB: So the department developed a level of academic respectability?

DL: In terms of mainstream criteria, I suppose you could say yes. But as I said, the Gender Equity Unit, from the 1990s, had a profound sense of academic responsibility to students who attended its Winter School and who did their Honours and MA studies there. Among others, Dr Benita Moolman, now at the HSRC, and Prof Sa'diyya Shaikh, HOD in religious studies at UCT, are feminist scholars whose academic profile was enriched by what the Unit offered. It's unfortunate, to say the least, that feminist teaching and research sites are valued academically only when they take exactly the same form

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that conventional disciplines linked formally to departments do – irrespective of the content they offer, their impact on students, or the dedication of staff members.

DB: As I keep telling everybody, it's the most successful women's and/or gender studies programme. To what do you attribute this wonderful success?

DL: Well, thanks for that affirmation! We really are fortunate to have fantastic students. Speaking for myself, my students have inspired me to develop courses that are both engaging and relevant to young peoples' lives, but also intellectually rigorous. There's one course in particular that I enjoy: "Gender and Embodiment", which is a third-year course. I do all kinds of things to try to integrate creative with more conventional scholarly work. For several years, I had a film-maker who worked with some of the enrolled students to make films which they then showed to the wider campus community and for which they received credits. They really worked hard. Many, who had absolutely no knowledge of film-making, spent long hours learning to use cameras and editing. Also, most of us as staff rely on our students to collaborate with us on our research and the students are usually excited and keen to do this. I suppose most departments have groups of postgraduates who function directly or indirectly as mentors for undergraduates. But WGS postgraduates seem especially visible and proactive in doing this. The other thing is that – although it hasn't been easy – as staff we've learned to work collaboratively without necessarily agreeing on certain major political, academic or pedagogical issues. We've learned to trust and rely on each other as colleagues, but often disagree.

DB: So, in other words, research and teaching coexist in the department?

DL: Yes, research and teaching do coexist, although I certainly wouldn't say that our research interests direct dictate the courses we devise or teach. We often pursue our research interests in relation to teaching and what we learn from students. So, for example, the Gender and Embodiment course that I do is very much a reflection and an extension of work that I am interested in, as well as a reflection of students' interests and what they've encouraged me to explore – about media representations, the political ambiguities of popular culture or pop feminism, for example. For all of us, I believe, there is a massive and important connection between research and teaching.

DB: And do you also have a happy meeting of minds in the Department?

DL: One myth about women's and gender studies departments is that the "sisterhood" of staff get along all the time. This is a distortion of what interaction and collaboration among feminists means. Its about contestation and recognising differences, but also about finding common ground and moving forward.

Being a feminist really makes a difference in working to find this common ground: you start to take "the personal is political" seriously, to pay attention to interpersonal dynamics and their implications, and to be self-reflective in ways that some academics

don't. Working with other people is always hard, but I think we are able to deal with it by making an effort to understand one another in accordance with basic feminist principles. We also realise that feminist departments are generally beleaguered and that one does need to work in a way that shows a degree of solidarity in relation to the mainstream. So although the Arts Faculty is generally very respectful of what we do, we still need to make sure that our interests are represented in relation to the mainstream.

DB: This is also because historically Women's and Gender Studies units have always been small and easily overlooked by faculty management.

DL: Yes, we also have to pay attention to that. Ironically, management sometimes overlooks Gender Studies sites in conventional academic terms, yet also turns to them for what I'd call "invisibilised general reproductive work." We are often called upon to coordinate, assist with or plan all sorts of events, while our core business is not fully recognised. For example, not so long ago, we were asked as a department to take responsibility for the Jakes Gerwel Lecture. And then it became clear that our very particular role in the lecture was not going to be clearly identified, and that was outrageous. So we made sure that we were adequately acknowledged. There is almost an assumption that Women's and Gender Studies departments are responsible for nurturing and reproductive activities. And even though these often involve intellectual labour, they're not seen as real scholarly contributions. If any other department had done it, it would be seen as an important academic activity, but the attitude is that this is the women doing the "mothering" thing, which is what they "have" to do.

DB: Now moving on to your recent academic activities, as you know, you recently published a contribution to a discussion with Anne Phillips on gender and multiculturalism. What is your position in relation to multiculturalism?

DL: At that workshop we spent a lot of time talking about multiculturalism and debating it, but my view is that "multiculturalism" is a term that is often used in a managerialist way, to manage difference and diversity, so it's used in a top-down way. It is also used mainly in the Global North, and in situations where migrants are moving into places where there is a perception that racial difference and cultural diversity need to be managed, and the dominant (even though often implicit) agenda is assimilation. I thought, and many others at the workshop also thought, that it's a term that doesn't speak to us and that comes with baggage: this baggage involves, ultimately, re-hashing the dominant groups' politics, morality, understanding of "development" and "rights", and so on. This *isn't* respecting difference and diversity. I don't think any feminists in South Africa would call themselves "multicultural feminists". They would call themselves "black feminists" or "African feminists" or "postcolonial feminists" and that would be their way of signalling their alertness to the politics of difference in relation to feminism. But they would not use "multiculturalism".

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DB: Did the workshop with Anne Phillips and the other South African feminist scholars give you the impression that multiculturalism is an invention of the Global North?

DL: Yes, it did. I have used Anne Phillips's work a lot in my own writing and I have a great deal of respect for her attention to the multiple power dynamics that shape gender and feminism. And when I was starting to read and explore the global range of feminist work on intersectionality, I turned to Anne Phillips. But I think – and I said this in the workshop – that her work on multiculturalism harks back to a way of managing difference, and it's disturbingly reminiscent of the way that mainstream Western-centric feminists in the past openly defined feminism, justice and rights for other women.

DB: Do you think there is a better way, in the South African context, of managing gender and cultural difference?

DL: I think the word “managing” is itself a problem.

DB: Could we rephrase it as “negotiating gender and cultural difference”?

DL: Multiculturalism is a problem for me, not so much because of the terminology, but because of the way in which it conceptualises difference as a “problem” to be “fixed”. For example, Anne Phillips focuses very much on universal rights, and she writes about the importance of certain rights as transhistorical and applicable to all. But I think that as soon as you start to say that some rights should be universal, then you do have a problem, especially if those rights are developed in one context and then applied to others. Many feminists in South Africa have offered critiques of this trend in thinking. They have spoken critically about how our rights approach actually benefits some women, and certain gays and lesbians – in allowing them to have the rights that men and straight people have – but doesn't mean much to the majority, who face intersecting and numerous political challenges. I would say that transnational and transversal feminists have been much more aware of the fact that every context can be associated with certain struggles, and that there are struggles and ideas about freedom that particular radical groups develop in each context. There needs to be more dialogue between these groups and solutions from each context. This seems very abstract, and maybe utopian. But addressing long-established global, racial and class struggles would have to require feminist thought and action that involves hard work – on oneself and one's biases as well as with others.

DB: So there should be more engagement and more conversation, and less imposition.

DL: Yes.

DB: Right at the moment, you're visiting the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Studies on a three-month fellowship, while you work on a book on assemblage and intersection. Can you tell me more about this project?

DL: In the book I want to take another look at some of the power relations and feminist trajectories I've already discussed and thought about, specifically how one conceptualises, understands and explores gender in relation to other identities. The reason why I think it's important to focus on both intersectionality and assemblage is that assemblage has more flexibility and lends itself to some of the political and ideological processes that progressive theories now need to take into account. I'm thinking especially of neoliberalism as an economic project and as one concerned with governmentality. I want to think about how earlier discussions of intersectionality evolved, and how there has been a shift towards more than simply acknowledging that "we need to look at gender, race and class".

DB: That was the old model of intersectionality.

DL: Absolutely. Globally, a number of scholars have used intersectionality in various ways, and have actually raised problems with the fixation on certain "foundational" categories only. But I'm especially interested in thinking about how feminist thought about intersectionality has evolved in South Africa, and where it has led us to. In some ways it's going to mean going back to some of the work that I've done earlier and developing that; but it will also mean new work, especially on the relationships between feminisms and current LGBTI politics, as well as the market-driven ideological climate in which we so often end up thinking about "freedom".

DB: Will the book be focused on the South African context?

DL: Yes, definitely. I think one needs to make reference to a context beyond South Africa because South Africa is linked to those contexts, but the focus will be on this country because that's the country that I know and the context I've been working in.

DB: What a wonderful opportunity to have a three-month fellowship in which you can focus on research and writing!

DL: Yes, I'm very privileged.

DB: And finally, while we're discussing large concepts, can you tell me what you think the key directions are for gender studies and feminism in South Africa at the moment? Where should these areas of enquiry be going?

DL: For me the answer lies in what I was trying to say in my talk on "Feminism and LGBTI studies and activism in South Africa" in the Institute for Gender Studies. I spoke about feminist engagement with thinking very carefully about constructions of sexuality. And when I say "thinking about sexuality", I don't mean doing empirical studies on same-sex subjects: that's not really engaging. I'm talking about theoretical and epistemological work that means analysing the discourses and relationships that form what we come to understand as identities. And also what the implications are of

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certain identifications. I'm interested in drawing on conversations between people who have been exploring queer theories and feminist theories. I think that's a very important area.

DB: What role do you think decoloniality can play in the development of feminist scholarship?

DL: I think – and I'm sure you agree with me – that feminists have been, for a long time, talking about what many people are only beginning to talk about now. If we speak about decolonising knowledge, this is what feminists have been making a case for in South Africa and in many other contexts. Rethinking the patriarchal canon, the methodological approaches that assume that scholars are ultimately authoritative in relation to their subjects, our gaze Northwards when we think about authoritative knowledge – and of course when we disparage what's not defined as “valuable” knowledge: these are the kinds of questions we've been asking, specifically around gender. Feminism has a great deal to contribute, and to me, quite frankly, many of the conversations around decoloniality are almost exactly the same as the conversations feminists were having twenty years ago. This is not to say that we don't have anything to learn: that would be ridiculous. But there have been productive debates, writings and struggles in the past that should not be overlooked.

DB: I think so too. And on that note, I'd like to thank you for your time and for sharing your insights with *Gender Questions*.